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Modernity Without Capitalism: Pandemic and the End of Fetishism

Corona and Its Discontents

The coronavirus outbreak has made clear the role of sacrifice in capitalist society. The favorite line of Donald Trump and his followers during the disaster was revelatory in this regard. Trump tweeted a sentiment that had widespread support from conservative leaders and commentators: “WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF.” According to this logic, the economic damage of the state’s decrees to shut down businesses and isolate people in their dwellings outweighed the lives that such decrees saved.

One of Trump’s epigones, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick of Texas, suggested that we openly accept capitalism’s demand for sacrifice. As he saw it, the coronavirus outbreak gave us the opportunity to enjoy the sacrificial logic of capitalism without needing to disavow it. He thought we should jump at the opportunity. At the onset of the coronavirus epidemic, he took advantage of a platform on FOX News and proclaimed, “No one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’ And if that’s the exchange, I’m all in.” Patrick not only preaches sacrifice for others but like a good pastor includes himself among those being offered up so that capitalism might live.

Patrick’s macabre quid pro quo occasioned outrage from a variety of sites. But no one pointed out that Patrick was not so much articulating a thought-out political position as giving voice to the unvarnished logic of capitalism. For this, we should heartily thank him. If capitalism